

# Nature and Religion

## Emile Durkheim



### Onwards and Upwards by Robert Koenig (2011)

This piece of art can be found in Campbell Park.

Onwards and Upwards was commissioned in 2010 to celebrate the retirement of The Parks Trust's chairman John Duggan.

It was created as a representation of the growth and development of both the park and the city.

It was carved from a single piece of eight-metre-high sweet chestnut. Another example of the artist's work, Boy and Girl, can be seen in Kents Hill near the Open University.

Onwards and Upwards replaced Metropolis, a previous piece by the same artist which was removed in 2000 due to deterioration.

In his book 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life' (1912), Durkheim argued that religion is social phenomenon created to provide emotional security. He observed that societies divide the world into two categories: the sacred (special) and the profane (ordinary).

He added that 'by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal things which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything can be sacred'.

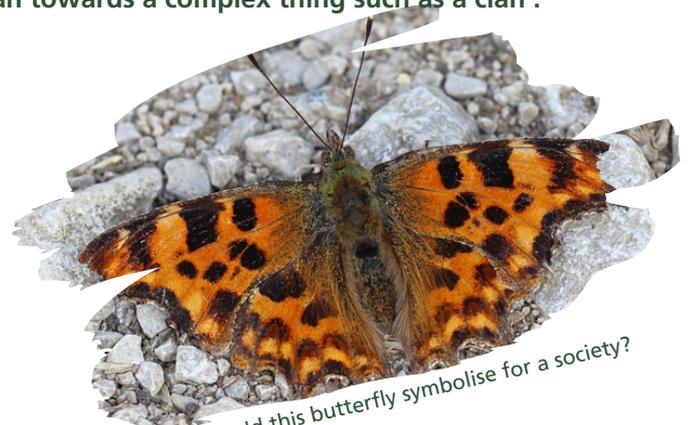
He said religion is based upon this division. It is 'a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things'.

He wrote this after studying the Indigenous people of Australia. He looked at the things that these people considered to be sacred and found there was nothing about the particular qualities of a pebble or a tree that made them sacred so they must be symbols which represent something.

He noticed that they lived in societies divided into clans, like a large extended family with shared duties, obligations and rules such as forbidding marriage within the clan, collectively mourning the death of a member and revenging another clan who wronged them.

Each clan has a totem, usually an animal or plant. The totem is represented by drawings made in wood or stone, called churingas. Churingas are often regarded as being more sacred than the species that they represent. The totem is an emblem of the clan to distinguish itself from the others. The tribe worships its sacred totem.

Durkheim argued that the totem is a deity representing the society. Whilst society is the real object of religious worship and admiration, it is easier for a person to 'visualize and direct his feelings of awe towards a symbol than towards a complex thing such as a clan'.



What could this butterfly symbolise for a society?

## Questions



This image shows one of the figures on Koenig's totem pole in Campbell Park. As the images on this piece of art are of humans, do you think they could still be considered churingas?

What does Durkheim mean by 'the distinction between the sacred and the profane'?

In your own words explain why the totem is so sacred to the Indigenous people of Australia.



Chain Reaction by Ray Smith (1992)

Can you think of an example of an image or symbol from nature that might be considered sacred in modern British society?

Have a go at creating a churinga or a totem to symbolise your class. You could drawn this or try making a 3D model!

 Share your ideas with us @theparkstrust

There is another totem artwork in Campbell Park called 'Chain Reaction'.

Why do you think it was given this name?  
What would you call it and why?

Milton Keynes has a unique mixture of cultures and communities. The city could be described as an example of cultural hybridity. Explain what this term means, using Milton Keynes as an example to help your explanation.



The artist Robert Koenig pictured with Onwards and Upwards when it was installed in Campbell Park in 2011